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ABSTRACT

For a college educator who works with students seeking certification to teach English, supervising student teachers affords the opportunity to visit many schools in any given semester. In Pennsylvania, school districts fund their own schools (with very little state assistance), so there is immense diversity in terms of access to technology. The educator's institution is in a rural area--nearby are Amish/Mennonite communities, Carlisle, a fairly large city which is progressive and competitive, and Chambersburg, another fairly large town in the vicinity of the university. Students in Chambersburg's high school have a small lab of outdated Macs. West Perry School District has an enterprising English teacher who received 25 old IBM PC's, which her students use as if they were cutting edge equipment. Everett, located in the what seems like middle of nowhere, has Internet-accessed computers in the secondary school, with staff development personnel for training and a grant writer for a project to put student portfolios online. The minimum components necessary for success with technology are the technology itself, software, a dedicated tech support staff, regular staff development on practical implementation of the equipment, a clear plan for technology, and vision. Students need readiness skills, motivation to excel using technology, reliable tools with which to work, and a comprehensive integrated curriculum. Staff needs training and practice, resources (stipends, release time), support in terms of tech and curriculum design, and time and access. (NKA)

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Technology in Teacher Education: Possibilities and Practicalities

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My contribution to the panel called "Myths of Democracy: Computers and the Calcification of Class" (CCCC, Chicago, 1998) involves the incorporation of technology at the secondary school level. For 14 years before getting my advanced degree, I taught English in junior high and high school. After my degree, I moved to the university where I work in the English department with students seeking certification to teach English. Supervising Student teachers affords me the opportunity to visit many schools in any given semester, and I have witnessed immense diversity in terms of access to technology. In Pennsylvania, school districts fund their own schools, with very little state assistance. Because of Pennsylvania's history as a strong union state, the teachers' salaries are high. Many of the rural districts I visit barely get by just staffing classes; what suffers is resources for things like books, technology, and other instructional resources. As I write these words, I sit in a rural junior high/high school library with about one-third as many books as my sons' elementary school library back in suburban Texas, a state that spends a proportionately larger amount on educational resources. Without getting into the complexities of school funding, collective bargaining, or of regional attitudes toward education, let me describe some specific scenarios with I am familiar that magnify the issue of inequality of access.

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Our university is in Shippensburg Pennsylvania, 40 miles south of the capital Harrisburg, a little over 100 miles from Washington DC and only 4 hours from New York City. Yet Amish/Mennonite buggies clop down our main street daily, and the countryside is dotted with farms. We are rural. My territory (where my student teachers are placed) is decidedly varied in its

approach to many educational issues, including technology. Carlisle, a proportionately large city to our north, is fairly progressive and competitive educationally. The secondary schools contain the best in technological equipment and access to the Internet. Yet teachers I work with there claim that the district does not provide technological support, enough software, or staff development. The result is that teachers do not have the time to develop interesting lessons using the existing technology; the "bells and whistles" computer labs end up serving as expensive typewriters. Chambersburg School District, just to our south, is another town that is larger than Shippensburg. The high school contains 2000 students, who come from smaller communities nearby. The English faculty of 20 had, until this year, a small lab of outdated Macs. This year the math department wrote a better grant, and the school took the room from the English department, sent the old computers to the junior high, and setup the new math lab there. The English department can only use it one period a day--when no math teacher is scheduled to use it. This situation occurs in a district with a mission statement "committed" to providing the best in technology and learning.

West Perry School District, just to our west, is located in a county in Pennsylvania with not even one traffic light; they had one but someone shot it out a couple of years ago. The teachers there have no computer lab in the junior high (where I place many student teachers); however, one enterprising teacher has begged and received 25 old IBM PC's which line her room. When she assigns an interesting assignment and allows the students, many of whom are learning support students, to use these old clunkers, you would think that they are working on cutting edge equipment. Ms. Stoops has learned to take existing technology and use it to its potential, despite her district's inability to support her. Everett, the school district in which I do consultant work in writing, is located in what seems like the middle of nowhere. Their administration,

however, is committed to bringing to their students the best. They have Internet-accessed computers in the secondary school, and they have brought in several staff development personnel to help train them in using it to its potential. Their district grant-writer has just written an $80,000 grant for a project to put their student portfolios online. While they have many problems with student attendance, a community that doesn't always understand or support their projects, and a staff that's overworked--Everett seems to be on the right track with technology: they understand that it's not a cure-all, and they're trying to provide all the components for a successful technology initiative.

What components are necessary for success with technology? The bare minimum are the technology itself, necessary software, a dedicated tech support staff, regular staff development on practical implementation of the equipment, a clear plan for technology, and vision. Students need: readiness skills, motivation to excel using technology, reliable tools with which to work, and a comprehensive integrated curriculum. Staff needs: training and practice, resources (stipends, release time), support in terms of tech and curriculum design, and time and access. Rarely does a school district provide all these elements. Although I said I wasn't going to get into school funding and politics, it's difficult to discuss this issue without touching on it. Right now in New Hampshire a court fight is trying to settle the school funding issue. Schools side by side are vastly different in terms of resources, building quality, you name it. I was teaching in Texas several years ago when the "Robin Hood" bill passed, and Texas school districts had to find ways to equalize the resources. Being from a large, fairly wealthy district, people in the city were not too happy at first with sharing the wealth. But they survived, students from poorer districts fared better, and everything is OK. Texas still does well in terms of state funding, the teacher retirement system, and the amount that the state commits to textbooks. Pennsylvania's attempts at

equal funding, through some kind of formula I don't understand, have failed. Numerous lawsuits appear from time to time challenging the system. The teachers unions, of which I am a member, keep salaries high, the average being about $46,000. Rural districts with a small tax base can barely survive. Technology, for many of them, is a luxury that they cannot afford, however, many of them scrape by with inadequate books and other teaching materials.

At the university, I must admit that our technological needs are pretty well met. I expose my future teachers to a great many ways to incorporate technology into their teaching, including some of the obvious like Internet research and Internet as a teacher resource, using e-mail in the classroom, hypertext authoring and electronic portfolios; students can use Power Point for presentations, and our lab is equipped with plenty of software. Our support team is helpful, and we have the time to investigate and master the technology. But these new teachers will not find this level of technology in the buildings in our area. Superintendents call for graduates with electronic literacy, yet for the most part they will not have the technology to use.

If I have a position in all this, it's that since states are given the burden of education their children, they must commit to the resources and help the local districts to survive. Stop raising the standards for the certification of teachers, as our Governor Tom Ridge is doing; the problem is certainly not the quality of our new graduates. Worry instead about how to spend money for children in terms of books, buildings that are suitable, and, yes, technology that can help the learning process. But don't go half-way: commit also to the support, the staff development, and the time to use the equipment. Many of students come from homes that can't provide them "the world"; our schools can and should. I agree that technology won't and shouldn't be expected to solve all the problems of education or more specifically of literacy; however, it can help. Let's put our money where our mouse is.